



**Legend of Zelda: ALTP**  
**Shintoism at play**

# The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past

Shintoism at play

**Keywords:** The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past, Fatal Frame, Kusanagi no tsurugi, The Legend of Zelda, Makoto Shibata, Sacred mirror, Sacred sword, Shigeru Miyamoto, Shinto, Shintoism, Three Imperial Regalia, Three Regalia, Yasakani no magatama, Yata no kagami, Zelda Fitzgerald

**Disclaimer:** You may choose not to read this if you have yet to finish the game and you don't want its story spoiled to you.

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## 1 Introduction

Much has been written about Okami and its indebtedness to Shintoism, the native Japanese state religion, but rarely is the Shinto connection brought up when the Legend of Zelda series are being discussed.

My knowledge of Shintoism is very limited, but even with my base understanding of it, I am able to pick up on several allusions in popular videogames, specifically the Zelda series. I chose The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past to best illustrate my case that the Zelda series' themes are steeped heavily in Shinto tradition and folklore.

## 2 The 'legend' of Zelda Fitzgerald

The titular character of the game, Princess Zelda, was named after Zelda Fitzgerald (1900 - 1948):

Zelda was the name of the wife of the famous novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald. She was a famous and beautiful woman from all accounts, and I liked the sound of her name. So I took the liberty of using her name for the very first Zelda title. - **Shigeru Miyamoto**

The story of the real-life Zelda was one of shattered dreams and tragedy. Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896 - 1940) were a dream couple of their day - a marriage that seemed to be a match made in heaven. It wasn't long until the illusion was shattered, however: Zelda Fitzgerald was diagnosed as a schizophrenic and F. Scott Fitzgerald developed a serious alcohol problem. Eventually the couple began turning on themselves - the tipping point was when Zelda, herself being a writer, poet and dancer, wrote a thinly disguised autobiography of their marriage, 'Save Me The Waltz'. To Scott, this was the ultimate betrayal, even though he had committed a similar sin in one of his previous books. When Zelda asked him, "didn't you want me to be a writer?", Scott viciously lashed out at her:

"No, I do not care whether you were a writer or not, if you were any good... you are a third-rate writer and a third-rate ballet." - **F. Scott Fitzgerald**

That line alone was enough to cause Zelda to sink into another nervous breakdown; with her self-esteem utterly destroyed, it was to be her last book.

The end of her story would prove to be just as tragic; the hospital at which she was admitted caught fire in 1948, resulting in her ill-timed death.

It's likely that Miyamoto was touched by this women's sad misfortune and used her name not merely as a namesake, but to bring her story into the public consciousness of a younger generation (hence the title 'The Legend of Zelda').



Fig. 1: (From left to right): a picture of Zelda from Twilight Princess (left), and Zelda Fitzgerald (right). Starting with Twilight Princess, Zelda has went from platinum blonde to brunette - does Nintendo want her to more closely resemble her namesake?

### 3 Shintoism

Like Hayao Miyazaki, Shigeru Miyamoto, creator and designer of such videogame hits as Super Mario Bros and Legend of Zelda, is an admitted Shintoist<sup>1</sup>.

Many of the terms being used in this article that refer to Shintoist concepts might be alien to western audiences. For background reading that is at least related to concepts and themes featured in Japanese videogames and anime, I can highly recommend the articles[1]Shinto Perspectives in Miyazaki's Anime Film 'Spirited Away'', and '[2]Essay: A Look at Jewel Folklore in Japanese Developed Video Games'.

If a term or name is unfamiliar to you, see 4 on page 18.

#### 3.1 The Triforce and the Three Regalia

The Japanese Imperial family purports to descend from the same bloodline as Amaterasu, making them the legitimate rulers of Japan (for Amaterasu was the Shinto sun goddess, who brought sunlight to the country and made the crops grow).

To be a legitimate ruler, Shintoism states, one must possess the virtues of power, wisdom, and benevolence. These virtues are enshrined into three sacred objects, passed down from Amaterasu all the way to her descendants, the Japanese Imperial Family. These are known as the Three Imperial Regalia (Sanshu no Jingu). In no particular order, the sword epitomizes power, the mirror wisdom, and the jewel benevolence/courage.

Similarly, in The Legend Of Zelda, Miyamoto chose to symbolize these artefacts of imperial legacy as a sacred triangle made up of three smaller triangles, each representing one of the virtues of the Imperial Regalia. This object, called the Triforce, was placed by the Gods of Creation in the Sacred Realm as a symbol of divinity, and thus became highly sought after by those wishing to rule the world (see 3.2 on page 7).

Regalia	Equivalent Zelda object/concept
Kusanagi no tsurugi (Sacred sword)	Master Sword
Yata no Kagami(Sacred mirror)	Magic Mirror
Yasakani no magatama (curved jewels)	Moon Pearl/Pendant of Courage/Pendant of Power/Pendant of Wisdom

<sup>1</sup> According to this source:

Miyamoto is a Shintoist and has publicly acknowledged incorporating Shinto into the Zelda games.





Fig. 2: The Hojo symbol can be seen practically anywhere in Japan, such is its popularity - it is even on traffic signs.

The symbol used to represent the Triforce (that of a triangle consisting of three smaller ones), it must be noted, is not a work of fiction. Rather, it is known as the family crest of the Hojo clan (also see Hojo in popular culture), a powerful family in Kamakura-era Japan holding the title of shikken, or regent. In actuality, it was the Hojo family that was the real executive instead of the Shogunate. Though their rule was dictatorial in approach, they were credited with bringing relative peace and prosperity to Japan. More importantly, though they were able to defend Japan against the Mongols, a powerful force who had just conquered China and were on their way to east Japan. As luck would have it, a hurricane deterred them from ever sieging Japan (that, and the inhabitants of conquered countries revolted).

Their symbol has since been adopted and accepted by Japanese culture as a whole, not just Shintoism. (for instance, their family crest symbolism pops up in several corporate logos - Mitsubishi uses a similar motif for its logo) This is probably the reason for its inclusion in the game as the ultimate harbinger of power - the Triforce symbolizes the relative peace and stability under the Hojo regime. Which by definition would make Ganon and his mob the Mongolian hordes.

### 3.2 The Sacred Realm

A Link To The Past was one of the first mainstream games that introduced gamers to the concept of parallel worlds/dimensions. Far from being a figment of Miyamoto's imagination, this is a concept drawn from Shintoism<sup>2</sup>.

Kami, the reverential spirits in Shintoism, dwell in an other-dimensional realm called 'Ama' or 'heaven'. This history lesson on Shintoism has the following to say about this spiritual realm:

An interdimensional nexus between Ama and Earth exists somewhere on Mount Fuji near Tokyo on the island of Honshu. The pathway which connects the two realms is called Ameno-kihasi-date, or "bridge of heaven." According to legend, Izanagi, the ruler of the Japanese Gods, once stood on this path as he plunged his staff into the sea and created the islands of Japan.

In the game, the Triforce resides in this Sacred Realm, and it is said that the one who holds it will be able to rule the dimension. This drives hordes of people to the Sacred Realm, battling to death over who gets to hold the Triforce. Ganondorf, a thief and a crook, eventually succeeds in obtaining this treasure. Because his heart is not pure and his motives are evil, the Sacred Realm ceases being a heavenly Garden of Eden and instead turns into a polluted cesspit, reflecting what is inside Ganon's heart.

<sup>2</sup> The concept of parallel worlds has been made palatable to western audiences by the emergence of quantum mechanics - in particular, the many worlds interpretation, or MWI. There is still debate over whether the time travel in the Zelda series is actually consistent with the rules of quantum physics.

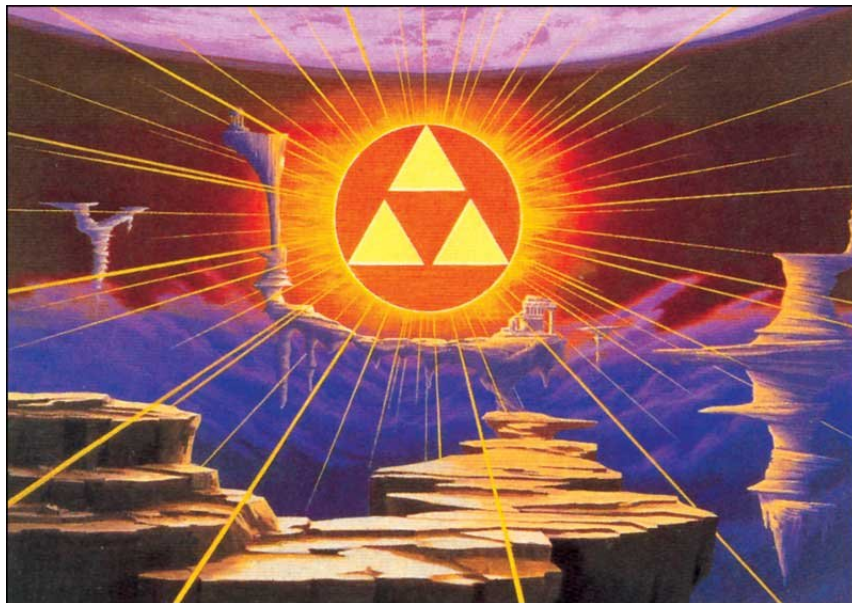


Fig. 3: The Sacred Realm was changed to the Golden Land in the English version. The realm re-appears in later Zelda sequels by its proper name, suggesting Nintendo of America has dropped any pretense of political correctness.



Not only the environment changes for the worse - most of the persons dwelling inside turn into either monsters or inanimate objects because they were driven by greed and lust in their quest for obtaining the Triforce.

Ganon, in his megalomania, threatens to conquer Hyrule. To prevent this from happening, seven sages of Hyrule convene to block the entrance to the Sacred Realm, stopping Ganon's crusade dead in its tracks. These men are later referred to in reverential tones as the 'Seven Sages'.

### 3.2.1 Agahnim the priest

Having been barred from entering the Light World due to the seal cast by the Seven Sages of yore, Ganon opts for a different approach to conquer Hyrule in addition to the Sacred Realm. His proxy, Agahnim, is a priest practiced in the art of occult rituals. Appearing out of nowhere in Hyrule/The Light World, the King's intuition fails him when he declares Agahnim to be the 'second coming' of the Seven Sages. The king clearly infatuated with his skill, Agahnim earns his trust and works himself into a position of power within the royal family. Once settled in, he slowly begins to corrupt the Imperial Palace from within. The king becomes ill and comes under the influence of Agahnim. The guards get manipulated into hunting down the virgin maidens who are descendants of the Seven Sages.

It is not clear if Agahnim is an actual person who is being manipulated by Ganon (as the US version seems to imply) or whether he is nothing more than a puppet (as the Japanese version would suggest), a manifestation of Ganon in the Light World. The latter would explain why Agahnim's clothes cover as much of his body as possible, including his face.

**3.2.1.1 Sacrifice rituals** In order to break the seal of the Sacred Realm, Agahnim (referred to in the Japanese version as a 'master of rituals') has to conduct an ancient ritual involving human sacrifice. Specifically, this involves the sacrificial offering of seven virgin maidens whose bloodline traces back to that of the Seven Sages. Zelda is among one of these sacrificial lambs (she suspects as much before the initiation of the final part of the ritual, and calls out to Link's uncle - through telepathy - to come rescue her).

Does the ritual constitute a Shinto human sacrifice ritual? It's hard to say without any specific knowledge on the matter, but it is a given that the concept of virgin sacrifices frequently pops up in tons of other Japanese videogames, including the Fatal Frame/Project Zero series (and, to a lesser extent, Final Fantasy X). According to the director of Fatal Frame, Makoto Shibata, it is a part of Shintoism's ancient past that most acolytes today would rather tend to deny all existence of<sup>3</sup>.

The English version removes any and all references pertaining to 'sacrifices' or 'rituals'<sup>4</sup>. It also obfuscates Agahnim's true role: that of him being a priest

<sup>3</sup> For more details, see the articles [4]I call it, Subtracting horror and [5]Project Zero 2 - Interview with Makoto Shibata - Series (go to Interviews and click on 'Read more').

<sup>4</sup> For instance, compare this line of the Japanese original to the English version[6]:



Fig. 4: Agahnim seen here sacrificing the seventh maiden, Zelda, and thus completing the ritual and opening the gates to the Sacred Realm. You later meet her spirit again in the aforementioned spiritual realm.

rather than a wizard.

**3.2.1.2 State propaganda** Link's successful rescue attempt of Zelda early on in the game throws Agahnim off-guard. But with a paramilitary at his

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**Japanese original**

**Princess Zelda:**My name is Zelda.... Six sacrificed were offered up, and I am the last one...

The priest Aghanim, who appeared at the castle, is using the sacrifices in an attempt to open the seal of the Seven Sages again.

**US version**

**Princess Zelda:**The wizard, Agahnim, has done... something to the other missing girls. Now only I remain...

Agahnim has seized control of the castle and is now trying to open the seven wise men's seal

command, he soon starts employing state propaganda to his advantage.

Where previously billboards had messages on them encouraging local citizens to bring female virgin descendants of the Seven Sages to the Palace ('by orders of the King', allegedly), now they have warning messages on them encouraging citizens to call the police as soon as they encounter Link.

The player gets to experience first-hand what it feels like to be persecuted by the state when he visits Kakariko Village. Upon trying to engage a local into a conversation, they call the cops on him and quickly enter their house and lock the doors.

### 3.2.2 Corruption of the Sacred Realm

True to Shinto teachings, everything in the Sacred Realm, living to inanimate, has the potential to be a 'kami' (spirit). On his travels across the 'Sacred Realm', Link encounters various kamis - trees, monkeys and frogs. Most of them are ready to converse with you, others respond to your presence with violence.

Not only living beings are affected by the pollution inflicted on the Sacred Realm - the environment, too, has suffered immeasurably because of Ganon's corrupting force. Forests that were once lush are now smog-ridden and desolate and rivers have turned into swamps. Because the environment has been irreversibly damaged, the humans and animals who depend on it suffer all the same. This concept, of nature and human beings living in harmony being absolutely essential, speaks to many Japanese adherents of the religion, which is first and foremost a nature religion.

## 3.3 The Triforce and the Three Regalia, Part II

### 3.3.1 The Sacred Sword

A central plot device in the game is that of the Master Sword - a sacred sword spoken of in hushed tones. Only by wielding the Master Sword does Link have any chance of defeating the evil Agahnim, Zelda tells him. But to our young hero's inconvenience, the sword has been sealed into its place. Only a person with three pendants of different virtues can hope to remove the sword from its pedestal, and Link will have to pass several trials to obtain these.

The similarities between the 'Master Sword' and the sacred sword spoken of in Shintoism, Kusanagi no tsurugi, can't be coincidental.

The legend goes that Amaterasu gave to her grandson the three treasures - 'sacred sword', the 'sacred mirror' and a sacred 'magatama' - to restore order to Japan. For each of these three revered items, we find an equivalent in A Link To The Past (also see 3.4 on page 16). Furthermore, the three pendants needed to retrieve the sword also happen to represent the same virtues (respectively: power, wisdom, and courage).

Another interesting reference to the Kusanagi no tsurugi lies in its name - translating roughly to 'Grass Cutter'. Ironically enough, Legend of Zelda: A



Fig. 5: From top to bottom: The Kusanagi no Tsurugi, one of the Three Imperial Regalia (top); its videogame equivalent in the Zelda series, the Master Sword (bottom).

Link To The Past was the first game in the series where it was possible to cut the grass with Link's sword.

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### 3.3.2 The Sacred Mirror

Shintoism has an interesting tale to tell about the sacred mirror that seems to dovetail with the game's storyline. Amaterasu's brother, Susano'o, grows insane and starts wreaking havoc on the land - even going as far as throwing the skinned corpse of a horse at her hand-maidens. Amaterasu, frightened out of her mind, seeks refuge in a cave and rolls a giant boulder in front of its entrance to block entry to it.

With Amaterasu gone and missing in the heavens, the world was bereft of sunshine and everything started to wither and die. The Omikami (the other gods) try to think of a way to lure her out of her cave. Their plan involves setting up a mirror in front of the entrance - upon seeing her reflection in the mirror, the Omikami would then take hold of her.

The story then goes on to tell us of a voluptuous goddess, Ame-no-Uzume, who has an alternative idea to draw Amaterasu out of the cave - she dances exotically in front of the cave and exposes several parts of her body. The gods in the heaven (Omikami), sexually aroused and humored by this act, start laughing and cheering loudly in approval. Amaterasu, wondering what all the uproar is about, decides to come out of her cave and is then mesmerized by what she sees in the mirror - her own divine appearance. (she had never seen her own reflection before) After this, the Omikami convinced her to return to the Celestial Plains, and this led to a happy ending where the sunlight was restored and crops started to grow again.

We see a clear homage to this story in A Link To The Past. To obtain the last Pendant, Link has to lift a giant boulder barring the entrance to a cave leading to the Mountain of Hera. In front of the cave is a sign with a message from the King denying anyone entrance to the cave (it must be noted here that Agahnim has assumed all responsibilities of the King and is giving orders under his name). Once inside the cave, Link finds a lost old man that forgot the pathway leading outside. After helping him find the exit, the old man gives you a present in return - the Magic Mirror.

Link can use this mirror to travel between the parallel worlds of the game - the Light World (the physical realm) and the Dark World (the Sacred Realm/spiritual



realm).

In the 'Dark World' ('Sacred Realm'), all living things lose their physical likenesses and their outward appearance comes to reflect what's inside their heart. Link initially is affected by this too - upon using the Mirror for the first time, he transforms into a bunny (apparently, his soul/heart, or 'kokoro' in Japanese if you may, resembles that of a bunny). This leads us to the next and last of the three Imperial Regalia, the Sacred Magatama.

### 3.3.3 The Sacred Magatama

Link's first task in this 'Golden Land' (US version) / 'Sacred Realm' (Japan) is to regain his initial shape. In a nearby dungeon, he finds a Moon Pearl (the magatama/jewel - jewels play an important part in Japanese folklore and religion). With this pearl in his possession, he is able to avoid turning into a personification of his heart/soul<sup>5</sup>. In a way you could say that by obtaining this jewel, Link has obtained 'makoto no kokoro' - a Japanese term translating to 'true heart', or 'sincerity of heart'. In Shintoism, just like a person's body can get dirty or the environment can be polluted, so too the soul is susceptible to pollution.

How does this fit in with the mirror you say? Well, in Shinto lore it is said that Amaterasu, the sun goddess, has a mirror, the Yata no Kagami, which reveals a person's true colours - literally. To put this into context with the game, if the person reflected in the mirror is a vile human being, he will have the appearance of a 'ghoul', or worse. However, if that person is of the benevolent kind, he may look like a rabbit.

So when Link first looks into the mirror and enters the Sacred Realm, he turns into a rabbit - thus, at heart he is really a cute rabbit, not a strong warrior. He will stay that way in the Sacred Realm until he has obtained the 'magatama'/Moon Pearl.

But there's more to this story. Since the days of feudalism, Shinto Miko maidens often wear a magatama on their person in religious rituals or ceremonies - it is said to protect the wearer from evil and grant him/her beneficial powers ("the magic of good fortune"). So we can already establish the connection between the age-old religious beliefs of the magatama and the shapeshift-resistant qualities that the Moon Pearl grants Link. Add to that the Sacred Magatama

<sup>5</sup> In the Japanese version, the old man at the mountaintop makes special mention of the fact that by obtaining the Moon Pearl, Link has proven himself to be the fabled Hero of Time - according to the game's backstory, only the Hero who is said to bring peace and prosperity back to the Sacred Realm can wield the Moon Pearl.

From the Japanese script (see this link for a comparison - you need to scroll down to "Old man on Death Mountain, after Tower of Hera"):

The Moon Pearl is a charm of the Hero who proceeds to the sacred land. It protects from the magical power that changes a person's form.

You, who have obtained it, surely are the Hero I have been waiting for. Please save the maidens!

By contrast, the English version once again downplays this - perhaps they didn't want to make Link into a messianic-like figure and modified any line hinting at prophecies.



Fig. 6: (Clockwise): The sign instructing people not to enter the cave (topleft); the boulder blocking the cave - Link can only lift it when he obtains the gloves (topright); Link finds an old man inside the cave - he needs to help him find the exit (bottomright); Once outside, the old man rewards him with a magic mirror (bottomleft).



Fig. 7: The Moon Pearl allows Link to traverse the Sacred Realm without changing into a personification of his heart/soul.

is said to house the spirit of Amaterasu herself and it adds another layer of reference altogether.

### 3.4 The hero and the monarchy

The English version goes out of its way to avoid any religious connotations (remember that this game was released at a time when Nintendo of America had stringent conservative guidelines<sup>6</sup>).

However, if we compare the Japanese text with that of the 1992 English script, it suggests that Link has a symbiotic bond with the three sacred items needed to restore order to Hyrule. Moreover, it seems that his quest involves

<sup>6</sup> Terms such as 'Holy' were changed to 'White' in the Final Fantasy series, 'sacred' to 'Golden' in Legend of Zelda, and so on.

Nintendo of America's policies were fiercely opposed by both videogame developers and gamers alike, but won it plaudits from reactionary politicians and conservative parents. John Carmack was so disgusted by the endless back-and-forth with Nintendo's censorship police that he vowed never again to develop a game for one of Nintendo's consoles (this was shortly after the completion of the SNES Wolfenstein 3D port).

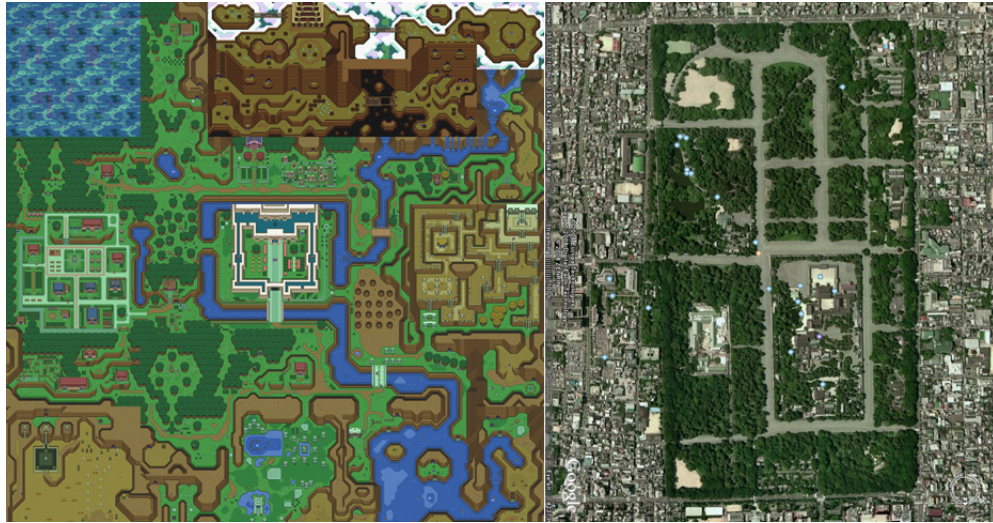


Fig. 8: (From left to right): A world map of Hyrule (left), and the Imperial Palace in Kyoto viewed from a top-down perspective (right).

not merely restoring order to Hyrule and defeating darkness (Ganon), but also to bring the Imperial family to their former stature.

At the end of the game, after Ganon's defeat, Link finally finds the Triforce and the sacred item informs him that he should hold the object with a pure heart ('makoto no kokoro') and with a wish in mind. The stronger the wish, the more effective the Triforce will be in granting his/her wish. The Triforce stresses that it does not discriminate between right and wrong - if a person of malintent holds it and grants a wish that plunges the world into darkness, it will do precisely that - but the opposite can also be true.

The ending leads us to conclude that Link, instead of being driven by greed and want of power (like Ganon was), instead approaches the Triforce without any self-benefiting goals and asks for nothing more than to return everything to normal. This leads to the return of the King, the seven maidens (who were killed in the ritual sacrifice), and the Sacred Realm returning to its former glory.

Is the game trying to say that the Imperial Family of Hyrule has a divine right to rule Hyrule? Does it deem the three virtues of the Regalia (power, wisdom and courage) necessary attributes to rule the land? Can we extrapolate from this that the Imperial Family of Japan has a divine right to rule Japan as well, and that if they were ever to be unseated, a hero in the mould of Link should restore them to power? It is plausible - following this train of thought, the Imperial Palace on the in-game map looks uncannily like the Imperial Palace in Kyoto from a bird's eye view.

## 4 Meaning behind words/names/terms

Name/word	Meaning	Object
Amaterasu Omikami	The Shinto sun goddess - in the mould of Horus and other sun/fertility gods/goddesses.	Shintoism
Ame-no- kihasi-date	The 'Bridge of Heaven', the pathway connecting the spiritual realm of the Kami, Ama, and the Earth realm.	Shintoism
Ame-no- Uzume	The goddess who was indirectly successful in luring Amaterasu out of the cave.	Shintoism
Kami	A literal translation would result in something nearing 'spirit', but from a western perspective 'spirit god' fits the bill as well. Everything, living to inanimate, has the potential to be a 'kami'.	Shintoism
Kokoro	'Soul', 'spirit'.	Term
Kusanagi no tsurugi	One of the Three Imperial Regalia, it is a sacred sword in the possession of the Japanese Imperial Family. The name itself translates roughly to 'Grass Cutter'.	Shintoism
Makoto	'Sincerity'.	Term
Makoto no kokoro	'True heart', 'sincerity and purity of one's heart'.	Term
Omikami	'Illustrious god'	Shintoism
Sanshu no Jingu	A term for the Three Imperial Regalia.	Term
Shikken	The regent for the Shogunate in Kamakura-era Japan. To the best of my knowledge, only the Hojo family could lay claim to this title, and it was only tried once in Japan's history. Contrary to what you may think, the shikken was actually more powerful than the Shogunate itself.	Concept
Susano'o	Amaterasu's (mischievous) brother. His actions eventually drove Amaterasu to lock herself up in a cave and in effect plunging Japan into darkness.	Shintoism
Yata no Kagami	One of the Three Imperial Regalia, it is the sacred mirror of Amaterasu in the possession of the Japanese Imperial Family.	Shintoism



Zelda no Densetsu: Kamigami no Triforce	The Japanese title translates to 'Legend of Zelda: Triforce of the Gods'. Note how the Japanese vocabulary is so rooted in Shintoism that the term for 'Gods' is a compound of 'Kami'. Also interesting is that Shinto means 'Way of the gods' - which would make Zelda 3's Japanese subtitle a pun.	Title
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